

Exercise Types

An effective exercise program uses a combination of exercise types to address program objectives. A comprehensive, integrated program of exercises will often involve various exercise types, all tailored to meet the objectives of the individual exercise and the program overall.

Seminars

Seminars generally orient participants to, or provide an overview of, authorities, strategies, plans, policies, procedures, protocols, resources, concepts, and ideas. As a discussion-based session, seminars can be valuable for entities that are developing or making major changes to existing plans or procedures. Seminars can be similarly helpful when attempting to gain awareness of, or assess, the capabilities of interagency or inter-jurisdictional operations.

Seminars do not typically result in a formal, comprehensive After Action Report (AAR)/Improvement Plan (IP); however, a final report, or Summary Report, can be developed to capture the discussions; issues raised; and, when appropriate, corrective actions that will address these issues.

Workshops

Although similar to seminars, workshops differ in two important aspects: participant interaction is increased, and the focus is placed on achieving or building a product. Effective workshops entail the broadest attendance by relevant stakeholders.

Products produced from a workshop can include new standard operating procedures, emergency operations plans, continuity of operations plans, and mutual aid agreements. To be effective, workshops should focus on a specific issue, and the desired outcome, product, or goal must be clearly defined.

Tabletop Exercises (TTXs)

A tabletop exercise (TTX) is typically held in an informal setting intended to generate discussion of various issues regarding a hypothetical, simulated emergency. TTXs can be used to enhance general awareness, validate plans and procedures, rehearse concepts, and/or assess the types of systems needed to guide the prevention of, protection from, mitigation of, response to, and recovery from a defined incident. Generally, TTXs are aimed at facilitating conceptual understanding, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and/or achieving changes in attitudes.

During a TTX, players are encouraged to discuss issues in depth, collaboratively examining areas of concern and solving problems. The effectiveness of a TTX is derived from the energetic involvement of participants and their assessment of recommended revisions to current policies, procedures, and plans.

TTX procedures are divided into basic and advanced categories. In a basic TTX, the scenario is presented and remains constant—it describes an emergency and brings discussion participants up to the simulated present time. Players apply their knowledge and skills to a list of problems presented by the facilitator or moderator; problems are discussed as a group; and resolution is reached and documented for later analysis.

In an advanced TTX, play advances as players receive pre-scripted messages that alter the original scenario. The moderator usually introduces problems one at a time in the form of a written message, simulated telephone call, videotape, or other means. Players discuss the issues raised by each problem, referencing established authorities, plans, and procedures for guidance. Player decisions are incorporated as the scenario continues to unfold.

During a TTX, all participants should be encouraged to contribute to the discussion and be reminded they are making decisions in a no-fault environment. Effective TTX facilitation is critical to keeping participants focused on exercise objectives.

Games

A game is a simulation of operations that often involves two or more teams, usually in a competitive environment, using rules, data, and procedures designed to depict an actual or hypothetical situation. Games explore the consequences of player decisions and actions and are therefore excellent tools to use when validating or reinforcing plans and procedures or evaluating resource requirements. During game play, decision-making may either be slow and deliberate or rapid and more stressful, depending on the exercise design and objectives. The open, decision-based format of a game can incorporate “what if” questions that expand exercise benefits. Depending on the game’s design, the consequences of player actions can be either prescribed or decided dynamically. Identifying critical decision-making points is a major factor in the success of games because players make their evaluated moves at these crucial points.

Drills

A drill is a coordinated, supervised activity usually employed to validate a specific operation or function in a single agency or organization. Drills are commonly used to provide training on new equipment, validate procedures, or practice and maintain current skills. For example, drills may be appropriate for establishing a community-designated disaster receiving center or shelter. Drills can also be used to determine if plans can be executed as designed, to assess whether more training is required, or to reinforce best practices. A drill is useful as a stand-alone tool, but a series of drills can also be used to prepare several agencies and organizations to collaborate in a full-scale exercise (FSE).

For every drill, clearly defined plans, procedures, and protocols need to be in place. Personnel need to be familiar with those plans and trained in the processes and procedures to be drilled.

Functional Exercises (FEs)

Functional exercises (FEs) are designed to validate and evaluate capabilities, multiple functions and/or sub functions, or interdependent groups of functions. FEs are typically focused on exercising plans, policies, procedures, and staff members involved in management, direction, command, and control functions. In FEs, events are projected through an exercise scenario with event updates that drive activity at the management level. An FE is conducted in a realistic, real-time environment; however, movement of personnel and equipment is usually simulated.

Response- and recovery-focused FEs are generally focused on exercising the plans, policies, procedures, and protocols, and staffs of the direction and control branches of the Incident Command System (ICS) and Unified Command, or multiagency coordination centers (e.g., Emergency Operations Centers).

A prevention-focused FE generally concentrates on exercising the plans, policies, procedures, agreements, networks, and staffs of law enforcement intelligence centers or agencies with counterterrorism missions. Adversary actions are largely simulated and delivered in the form of shared intelligence; however, some adversary actions may be carried out by simulated adversaries (red teams) in a separate but coordinated category of exercise play. FE controllers typically use a Master Scenario Events List to ensure participant behavior remains within predefined boundaries. Simulators in a Simulation Cell can inject scenario elements to simulate real events.

Full-Scale Exercises (FSEs)

FSEs are typically the most complex and resource-intensive type of exercise. They involve multiple agencies, organizations, and jurisdictions and validate many facets of preparedness. FSEs often include many players operating under cooperative systems such as the ICS or Unified Command.

In an FSE, events are projected through an exercise scenario with event updates that drive activity at the operational level. FSEs are usually conducted in a real-time, stressful environment intended to mirror a real incident. Personnel and resources may be mobilized and deployed to the scene where actions would be conducted as if a real incident had occurred. The FSE simulates reality by presenting complex and realistic problems that require critical thinking, rapid problem solving, and effective responses by trained personnel.

The level of support needed to conduct an FSE is greater than that needed for other types of exercises. The exercise site for an FSE is usually large, and site logistics require close monitoring. Safety issues, particularly regarding the use of props and special effects, must be monitored. Throughout the duration of the exercise, many activities occur simultaneously